DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 201 278 HE 013 757

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TITLE Integrating a GTA Training Program with Faculty Development.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Los Angeles, CA, April 13-17, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assistantships; Behavioral Objectives; Cognitive Objectives; Department Heads; Educational Media; *Faculty Development; Formative Evaluation; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Learning Modules; Needs Assessment; Program Development; Questioning Techniques; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teaching Assistants; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS University of Nebraska Lincoln

ABSTRACT

A graduate teaching assistant (GTA) training program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which has applied formative evaluation techniques, is described. The following nine teaching topics were identified as a result of a needs assessment: principles of student learning, communicating learning objectives, organizing and presenting lectures, using media, questioning and discussion techniques, tutoring, motivating students, providing constructive criticism, and testing and grading. Implementation of modules dealing with these topics involved a two-step process: the training of faculty to be GTA trainers, and the training of GTAs. Eighteen faculty members who were invited to be instructors in the program included those having special expertise on a specific topic and those who had interest, but limited experience in the topic. One member of each group formed a team to develop each module. Teams identified objectives, materials, and teaching strategies for each module. The formative evaluation concerned: individual assessment of the program by GTAs, feedback from department chairs, recommendations from faculty for revision of the program, audiotapes or videotapes of instruction, instructor outlines of content, and faculty reflections about their participation. GTAs completed questionnaires at the end of each module, and were asked to rate the value of the module on a 1-5 scale. GTAs were also asked to make recommendations for revision. Faculty instruction recommendations and conclusions of the formative evaluation are presented. Appended materials include a module planning guide and a module description form. (SW)

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INTEGRATING A GTA TRAINING PROGRAM WITH FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

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Presented at the Annual Meeting
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American Educational Research Association
Los Angeles, California

April 17, 1981

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Purpose of the Study

Most large universities have a common need for programs to prepare Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA's) to carry out numerous teaching-related duties. In some cases these programs are developed by individual departments and in others a campus-wide approach is used. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) has had a departmental approach resulting in some GTA's participating in "award winning" programs while others received very little guidance. Programs often included only procedural policies. Expertise among faculty responsible for GTA's did not always include knowledge and application of teaching strategies and skills.

Recognition of the need for development of teaching skills among GTA's was voiced by the UNL student government, campus academic administrators and the Board of Regents. Since the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) has a primary responsibility for improvement of instruction at UNL, it became a problem of the Center to utilize current resources to address this problem. How could a professional TLC staff of three implement a program for a large number of GTA's without detracting from faculty development which was the major focus of the Center's programs?

Carroll's review of research on programs for university teaching assistants indicates numerous approaches have been devised for training programs.[1] While program reports tend to support the value of such programs, the particular environment of a given institution may determine the type which will be most successful. Formative evaluation devices must be employed to design a program which will best accommodate for unique circumstances. It is the purpose of this paper to describe a developing GTA program which has applied formative evaluation techniques.

Methodology

A needs assessment study was initiated and funded by the Teaching Council, a faculty senate committee which has a budget for improvement of instruction grants. This study, conducted by a faculty member who had considerable expertise in GTA programs (a) reported GTA programs currently in existence, (b) reviewed types of GTA responsibilities in different departments, and (c) made recommendations for teaching skill topics which would relate to identified needs.

The Teaching Council also provided funds for implementation of the initial trial of a campus-wide GTA program. Travel grants for development purposes were awarded to faculty who participated in the planning and implementation of this program. Grants were made on the basis of quantity of involvement.

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[1] J. Gregory Carroll, "Effects of Training Programs for University Teaching Assistants," Journal of Higher Education, 51 (1980), 167-183.

Nine teaching topics were identified as the result of the needs assessment (See Table 1). Implementation of modules dealing with these topics involved in a two-step process: (1) the training of faculty to be GTA trainers, and (2) the training of GTA's.

Table 1

Modules Taught in the GTA Training Program at UNL, August 18-22, 1980

Module	Topic	No. of Sections	No. of GTA's
I	Principles of Student Learning	5	83
II	Communicating Learning Objectives	2	26
III	Organizing and Presenting Lectures	3	53
IV	Using Media	1	5
V	Questioning and Discussion Techniques	5	79
VI	Tutoring	2	15
VII	Motivating Students	3	42
VIII	Providing Constructive Criticism	2	16
IX	Testing and Grading	3	41
	Totals	31	360

Faculty Training

The number of GTA's eligible for this program required a large number of faculty to serve as trainers. Eighteen faculty who were invited to be instructors in this program were identified in two groups. One group included professors having special expertise on a specific topic who were identified to be topic leaders. A second group included professors who had interest, but limited experience in the topic. One member of each group formed a team to develop each module. It was anticipated that the second member of the team would experience considerable development as a result of the planning and implementation of the module.

Summer planning involved these two teams members working with the professional staff of the TLC to identify objectives, materials and teaching strategies for each module. (See Appendix A for planning guides). Materials oriented to teaching in higher education including books, paper, videotapes and audiotapes were utilized from the TLC's resource room. Faculty were encouraged to incorporate principles of instructional design in the modules and to model behaviors being taught. Application and practice of specific skills by GTA's were included when possible. This summer work was viewed as the "Faculty Development" step.

It provided (a) an exchange of ideas on teaching among faculty from different departments, (b) a reason to develop a "model" approach to teaching themselves, (c) awareness of materials on teaching which had not been used before, and (d) travel opportunity for future development activities.

Motivation for faculty participating in the program included recognition from peers for their contribution to the program via an article in the faculty teaching newsletter, a recognition letter from the Academic Vice Chancellor, a small travel fund, and a great deal of personal commitment.

Departments were asked to contact their own GTA's about participating in this program. Modules were taught in four-hour blocks during the week preceding fall semester classes. Multiple sections were provided so the maximum group size was twenty-four.

Formative Evalution

Data were collected from the following sources:

1. Individual assessments of the program by participating GTA's.
2. Feedback from department chairs.
3. Recommendations from faculty instructors for revision of the program.
4. Audiotapes or videotapes of instruction.
5. Instructor outlines of content.
6. Faculty reflections about their participation.

Results

1. GTA Assessment Data. Participating GTA's completed questionnaires at the end of each module. They were asked to rate the value of the module on alternatives from 1-5 with five as the highest rating. Table 2 gives mean ratings by module. They were also asked to indicate their level of confidence in being able to apply the ideas or skills. Table 2 also provides these mean ratings by module.

Table 2

Mean Ratings by GTA's on Value of Module and Confidence in Ability to Apply Skills

Module	Topic	$\bar{X}$ Value Rating (1-5)	$\bar{X}$ Confidence Rating
I	Principles of Student Learning	3.38	4.36
II	Communicating Learning Objectives	3.62	3.40
III	Organizing and Presenting Lectures	3.74	4.49
IV	Using Media	4.20	4.80
V	Questioning and Discussion Techniques	3.25	4.37
VI	Tutoring	3.60	4.80
VII	Motivating Students	3.66	4.71
VIII	Providing Constructive Criticism	3.90	4.65
IX	Testing and Grading	3.34	4.35

GTA's were also asked to make recommendations for revision. Table 3 lists by module the ideas that were expressed most frequently. A definite feeling is apparent toward greater orientation to specific content areas as well as inclusion of more specific application exercises. Generally the modules were viewed as too long; however, the testing and grading module was considered too short.

Table 3

Most Frequently Recommended Revisions by GTA's for Each Module

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX
More Content Orientation	X	X	X		X	X			X
More Applications	X	X		X	X				X
Shorten	X		X		X		X		
Lengthen									X
Separate Experienced T's			X						

2. Departmental Chair Feedback. All chairs of participating departments who responded to solicited feedback expressed strong support for the program. Recommendations included (a) providing more information to departmental supervisors on the content of modules and (b) trying to incorporate content specific examples when possible.

3. Recommendations from Faculty Instructors in the Program. Generally the program was well-received by participating faculty, academic departments, and GTA's with commitment to continue; however, the following were recommendations for revision:

A. Revise time allocations according to topics. Some topics such as "Questioning skills and discussion methods" could be divided into two, two-hour modules which could be selected separately and would be less tiring than one long 4-hour block. Some topics required 3-4 hours and should be kept the same.

B. Letters to GTA's about participation in the program should be worded to minimize negative attitudes. It was suggested that many GTA's felt "coerced" into attendance and this formed a barrier in instruction. It was suggested that one letter be written which could be used by departments to chairs to contact GTA's. A difference of opinion existed as to whether GTA's attendance should be required or voluntary. The consensus was that requirements were probably necessary although notices should not be abrasive.

C. Either limit this program to new GTA's or conduct different sessions for experienced GTA's and those who have had prior teaching experience.

D. Departments who sent GTA's to a large number of modules should be encouraged to select only those most appropriate since it was an exhausting week to spend up to 36 hours in "class".

E. Microteaching was an especially valued activity and should be considered for every GTA. This might be done in addition to other module topics.

F. Follow-up contact of GTA's with program instructors would be appropriate for some topics such as "Testing and Grading".

G. It is necessary to depend upon departments for follow-up work with GTA departmental supervisors. This would facilitate the continuity of this program.

H. All faculty instructors felt the program should be continued and indicated willingness to contribute toward this objective.

I. Many faculty felt they had derived benefits from working with a team member from a different area.

4-5. Audio/Video Tapes of Modules and Instructor Outlines of Content. These records indicated conformance to objectives identified for each component. Occasional redundancies were evident in Modules I and VII as well as in V, VI, and VIII.

6. Faculty Development Benefits. Faculty participants reported the following benefits:

A. Opportunity to gain new perspectives from a colleague from a different discipline.
B. Reason to organize one's ideas about choices to be made in teaching.
C. Gain in new information about teaching skills.
D. Greater personal awareness of what I do as a teacher.

All participating faculty indicated interest in repeating this experience.

Recommendations/Conclusions

1. Departments should be involved as much as possible in program planning to achieve maximum support.
2. Departmental GTA supervisors should be encouraged to join their GTA's in modules so they can provide content related applications and illustrations of the teaching skills and additional follow-up activities.
3. Participation in GTA program must be required rather than voluntary and direct communication to GTA's should be planned to develop positive attitudes.
4. Modules of instruction should be relatively short, discreet topics for flexibility and for fatigue reduction.
5. An orientation module communicating expectations for this program as well as for teaching roles should be added.
6. Modules should be redesigned to reduce redundancy and incorporate more application activities.
7. Each module should be redesigned to reduce redundancy and incorporate more application activities.
8. Mechanisms for feedback on faculty instructor's performance should be developed.
9. Experienced GTA's should be separated from "novice" GTA's and adjustments for differences in needs of these groups should be made.
10. Participating faculty gained personal developed as teachers from focused work with colleagues and from planning and teaching in this program.

Appendix A

MODULE PLAN GUIDE

Include answers to the following questions as you plan your module:

1. What is this topic or skill?

2. Why is it important to the college teacher? How does it pertain to the role of the teaching assistant?

3. How is the skill used? (Video examples might be helpful or a live example demonstrated by the instructor or an example in writing could be useful.)

4. Are there alternatives open to the teacher in applying the knowledge/skills? What are they? How can one decide which to choose?

5. How can TA's practice using the new knowledge or skill? (i.e., written exercises, videotaped TA practice with analysis, small group tasks, etc.)

6. What references would be helpful to TA's for further information?

7. What key ideas or hints could be provided in written form?

8. Could some topics be presented more clearly with overhead transparencies? Videotaped examples? Audiotaped examples?

9. Now can variety be used in the format to maintain interest? (i.e., question/answer discussions, small group analysis of issues or problems, written activities, use of visuals, opportunities to apply new ideas/skills and get feedback on how they did, etc.)

10. How can I assess what TA's now know about the topic and how well they can apply new skills?

11. How do TA's feel about this module?

MODULE DESCRIPTION FORM

1. Module Title:

2. Knowledge/skills TA's should have when they complete this module:

3. Outline of procedures used for teaching this topic (include kinds of media used, if any.)

4. Materials and/or references used in this module.

5. Please attach a copy of written quizzes and/or handouts planned.